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Social Ecology and Aesthetic Criticism

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Abstract

While ecocriticism has become a respected field in literary theory and in the broader landscape of aesthetic philosophy, it could benefit from an enhanced ethical-political framework which social ecology – an underrated critical theory developed by Murray Bookchin – could provide. This essay attempts to tease out the potentials for such a framework, integrating the insights of social ecology, ecocriticism, Critical Realism, and John Dewey's aesthetic concepts into a layered idea-set used for the study of all kinds of aesthetic objects, from popular art to the gallery arts. Its key principles are the emergence of aesthetic objects (including formal artworks) out of congealed human experience, the relation between organism and environment in assessing meaning, the breakdown of implicit or overt hierarchies within a work, and the idea of the artist and art-critic as a "gardener".

Keywords: Social ecology; Aesthetics; Ecocriticism; Aesthetic philosophy; Ecosemiotics

We live in an era of crisis and catastrophe. While nuclear war occupied the minds of the general populace and the artists alike throughout the second half of the 20th century, the subsequent neoliberal era has given way to a more fragmented set of species-destroying prospects. Everything from killer-robots, to viral epidemics, to totalitarian statism, to mass surveillance, to bio-genetic mutations appear in popular fiction as new threats to human survival. The social imaginary of a large part of our culture has responded to neoliberalism, with its rhetoric of triumph and the optimistic "end of history", by taking a turn for the apocalyptic.[1]

However, an apocalypse need not be an altogether gloomy affair. The English word comes from a Greek word, which, translated, means "lifting the veil", uncovering what was hidden, revelation. Moments of downturn may show us everything that could go wrong, but, if examined the right way, can also provide insights for how to transform things for the better.

That, in brief, could be framed as the central problem of the arts today, including the world of criticism which attempts to make sense of it: how to "lift the veil" in such a way as to reveal not only potentials for doom and dystopia, but potentials for hope and utopia – or rather eutopia (good place) as distinct from an impossible outopia (no place).[2]

Whether a contemporary person's mind is fixed on dystopian pessimism or eutopian hope, one topic of our cultural apocalypse is becoming more and more salient as a whole:

[1] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Zero Books, 2011)
[2] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 1990, 2013)

ecology. While nuclear war was often dealt with in direct and in-your-face ways when it came to artistic explorations, issues of ecological concern – global warming, pollution, environmental depletion, animal exploration – tend to be explored in more indirect and allegorical ways. Often, it's only in animated movies and TV shows that such topics are broached in an overt manner using anthropomorphic depictions of nature, such as talking animals, to inculcate a feeling of empathy and concern for the natural world being devastated.

Perhaps it's easier in other art forms – such as gallery art, literature, and music – to deal with environmental issues indirectly (by allusion and analogy), lest one run the risk of being perceived as "preachy", talking down to an audience and generating unproductive guilt for how bad things are. It can indeed be a trial to address ecology in the arts in such a way as to avoid either sounding holier-than-thou, or failing to address the systemic roots of ecocide and ending up moralising about your audience's behaviour as individuals. Both are almost guaranteed to turn a viewer off the whole subject in practice, even if they want to be on board in theory.

A sophisticated spectator of art wants to see a pressing topic explored in interesting ways without feeling as if they're being lectured at. Ecological problems are, in the last analysis, social problems, with their origins lying in how humans relate to the natural world, for good or for ill. Therefore, good art should find a way to make green issues relevant by making people conscious of how they are enclosed within social issues.

The arts and aesthetics are one of the main channels through which we humans attempt to make sense of our world and our situation in it. Which is why we need a framework for analysis that treats ecological and social problems as correlated and intertwined with each other.

We don't need to invent this framework out of nothing. Current moves in the new discipline of ecocriticism contain many relevant elements that are worth incorporating.[3] As for its core guiding values and drives, I'd like to suggest that inspiration can be sought in a little-known critical theory called social ecology. This new framework for analysing aesthetics in an ecocidal age will use social ecology as its toolkit for the purpose of relating to relevant arts and culture.[4]

This is not a fleshed-out proposal for a new school of aesthetic criticism, but more a brief catalogue of materials from which such an aesthetics might be built – modified and added to by an assortment of different theorists and creators in the arts, with the complete structure emerging from the contributions of many diverse voices.

A Brief Overview of Social Ecology

Coined by political philosopher and activist Murray Bookchin in the 1960s, social ecology is a heterodox school of green thought that emerged as a critique of anti-ecological trends in capitalist and statist society, as well as a critique of anti-humanist and technophobic trends in other forms of ecology, such as neo-Malthusianism and primitivism.

While often unacknowledged, Bookchin managed to predict many environmental and political developments long before they became accepted as common sense. These include the greenhouse effect, the need to invent decentralist and renewable forms of energy, and the potential of automative technologies to replace human labour and provide post-scarcity abundance, as well as the need to reject both the state and corporate forms as modes of

[3] Greg Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford University Press, 2014)
[4] Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (AK Press, 2005)

political-economic organisation, replacing them with bottom-up and participatory forms of direct democracy and horizontal federation.[5]

A good illustration from literature of social ecology's ideals is William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere*, in which a 19th century socialist time travels to early 21st century London finding it turned from a polluted industrial metropolis, a heartland of capitalism, into a beautiful decentralised ecotopia.[6] The state has been dissolved, formal marriage abolished, communities turned into self-governing direct democracies, and even money no longer exists. Bookchin personally loved Morris's work, and the libertine alternative it posed to statist and industrialist socialism. Though Bookchin also emphasised that an ecological society should not be sought in a "return to the past", but in using decentralised forms of the latest technology in non-ecocidal ways.[7]

While many of social ecology's hypotheses were ignored or dismissed as science-fiction in Bookchin's own time, that being the era of the post-war boom and what John Kenneth Galbraith called the affluent society,[8] his work, if anything, seems to have become more relevant over time, even prophetic in some instances. With the establishment of an enclave of directly-democratic communities set up in the Rojava-Kurdistan area of Syria in the middle of the war against ISIS, which are partly inspired by Bookchin's political ideas by way of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, a renewed interest in Bookchin and social ecology has emerged, with a very active online presence.[9] This could therefore be an opportune moment to mine his theoretical corpus for other worthwhile innovations.

To offer a general introduction to social ecology, it was born within the broader ethical-political tradition of social anarchism – which developed in the 19th century as the anti-authoritarian wing of socialism – and places primacy on its critique of all forms of hierarchical power, and advocacy of a decentralised self-organising society of autonomy as a solution to social, political, and economic problems. Bookchin was at first a Marxist, a tradition he inherited from his Russian migrant parents, but came to vehemently reject Marxism as authoritarian, economistic, and dismissive of social problems which couldn't be reduced to a simple "working class versus bourgeoise" model of social struggle – in particular the problem of ecology, which he believed would take on increasing significance as an issue on the political left.

Building on the work of social anarchist thinkers such as Peter Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus, as well as non-anarchist thinkers like Lewis Mumford and Hans Jonas, he replaced the conventional philosophic dichotomy between "nature" and "culture" with one of "first nature" and "second nature", in an attempt to get people to think of society as an extension of the natural world.

Unlike other green philosophies, social ecology is pro-technology and supports decentralising and ecologising technics down to a human scale to restore balance with ecosystems and provide well-being for humans, exerting a partial influence on the key figure of green economics, E.F. Schumacher and his book *Small is Beautiful*.[10] In *Post-Scarcity*

[5] Damien F. White, *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* (Pluto Press, 2008)
[6] William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, editor. Clive Wilmer (Penguin Books, 2004)
[7] Lewis Herber [Murray Bookchin], *Towards a Liberatory Technology* (Anarchy Archives, 1968), http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/tolibtechpart2.html
[8] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Mariner Books, 1958, 1998)
[9] Akbar Shahid Ahmed, *America's Best Allies Against ISIS Are Inspired By A Bronx-Born Libertarian Socialist* (Huffington Post, 2015) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syrian-kurds-murray-bookchin_us_5655e7e2e4b079b28189e3df
[10] E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (Vintage, 1973, 2011)

Anarchism and *Towards an Ecological Society*, Bookchin discussed solar and wind power, as well as human-scale labour-saving types of agricultural technologies and micro-manufacturing. Contemporary kinds of such decentralist eco-technology would include the free and open-source domains of the Internet, 3D printing, and communal fabrication laboratories.[11]

Social ecology extends social anarchism's ethical critique of hierarchy and centralisation to the relations between humans and their natural environment. It is argued the domination of nature by humans is a reflection of the domination of humans by humans. Social ecology holds that only through dissolving power hierarchies in the human world – such as statism, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and queerphobia – can balance be restored between humanity and nature, replacing the logic of extraction and domination with one of mutuality and stewardship.

Its overarching focus on dissolving every structure of hierarchical power make it a forerunner of what's now called intersectional theory,[12] as well as the myriad of academic attempts to meld feminist, socialist, anti-racist, queer, and green theories into an integrative social justice model, oriented towards achieving radical egalitarianism in the political, economic, kinship, and cultural spheres of life.

Social Anarchist Aesthetic Theory

You might therefore think that such an idea-set would be ripe for application in the broader humanities, and while attention has been scant thus far, a few attempts have been made, the most significant of which being the work of literary scholar Jesse Cohn.[13] In his highly underrated and underread book on social anarchist aesthetics, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation*, Jesse Cohn traces the history of how anarchists have interpreted arts and aesthetics, as well as anarchists' overall philosophic principles for analysing the world. This includes Bookchin's "dialectical naturalism", which was intended as a critique and synthesis of both the dialectical idealism of G.W.F. Hegel and the dialectical materialism of most Marxist schools of thought.[14] Cohn melds them into a helpful intellectual toolkit, which provides the needed components for an anarchistic mode of aesthetic critique.

Crucial is his inclusion of Critical Realism, the philosophy of the sciences coined by Roy Bhaskar, to his methodology.[15] It was formed in an attempt to steer science and philosophy away from both reductionistic positivism (at one end) and relativistic poststructuralism (at the other), developing a dialectical platform of study remarkably similar to Bookchin's, and also since adopted by other social anarchists such as anthropologists Brian Morris[16] and David Graeber.[17] Critical Realism attempts to resolve the dispute over what counts as truth by positing that while there is an absolute truth which is not relative – called "intransitive" – like Immanuel Kant's "noumena", this non-relative truth isn't fully accessible to humans, and is always necessarily mediated by interpretative truths which are relative –

[11] Kevin A. Carson, *The Homebrew Industrial Revolution* (Booksurge Publishing, 2010)
[12] Patrick R. Grzanka, editor., *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (Westview Press, 2014)
[13] Jesse S. Cohn, *Anarchism and the Crisis of Representation: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2006)
[14] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Black Rose Books, 1996)
[15] Andrew Collier, *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (Verso, 1994)
[16] Brian Morris, *Anthropology, Ecology, and Anarchism* (PM Press, 2015)
[17] David Graeber, "Radical alterity is just another way of saying "reality": A reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro", HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Studies (Volume 5, No. 2, 2015)
http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau5.2.003

called "transitive" – and contingent upon socially constructed models of how the world works. Jesse Cohn attempts to take this framework and apply it to literary critique, blending it with social anarchist ethical-political concerns in the process.

In Cohn's view, the value of art should be assessed in terms of how it (A) dialectically negates hierarchies and domination, and (B) how it points to egalitarian autonomy and free cooperation as positive alternatives. Cohn applies this social anarchist heuristic and aesthetic mostly to literature, drawing out the liberatory elements in works from mostly the modernist era. Neala Schleuning follows Cohn's course in applying the same principles to the social anarchist study of the visual arts, discussing Dada, Surrealism, Socialist Realism, and contemporary digital art.[18]

While Marxist and feminist modes of criticism focus on particular sites of domination (eg: class or gender), social anarchism and social ecology are potentially integrative in applying such anti-dominative analyses to all forms of hierarchy. Jesse Cohn sees social anarchist aesthetics as a "magpie" approach to literary (and artistic) criticism, incorporating other modes of interpretation where necessary, and using the cross-disciplinary methods of Critical Realism to present a heuristic which acts as a middle way between the "Author is God" view of classical literary theory, and the "Death of the Author" view of most of postmodernism, presenting meaning itself as something that arises from the dialectical tension between text and reader.

And though Cohn's social anarchist aesthetics uses social ecology as part of its methodology, stressing the ecological basis of his idea-set, this renewed aesthetic framework still stands to benefit from a more thorough application to the sphere of ecology, and to artworks with a conspicuous green dimension.

The Application of Ecological Ideas to Aesthetics

The discipline of ecology has been around for over 100 years as a field of study. As an activist ideal it was at first confined to the middle and upper classes, the preserve of people such as Theodor Roosevelt who wanted to conserve wilderness areas for mainly aesthetic and recreational purposes. In the 1960s and 70s, however, it grew in force as a part of the tide of New Left activist concerns, connecting state and capitalist exploitation of the mass of the people (for their labour) with the exploitation of the natural world (for its resources).[19] Murray Bookchin and social ecology were part of that tide, being a midpoint in a Venn diagram composed of the anti-authoritarian leftists and the pro-technology utopians in the green movement. And while greens quickly made a place for themselves in academia, it took longer than one would expect for a green tradition of artistic criticism to take shape.

The term "ecocriticism" itself was first used in the late 1970s, being coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*.[20] It gained traction throughout the 1980s, as green issues themselves began to grow as an area of popular and scholarly concern, and since the 1990s ecocriticism has become a more-or-less established mode of analysis in literary critique.

Ecocriticism is a new field in literary criticism, and while it grew at the same time that more politically radical schools of thought gained currency in the academy, it, for the most part, analyses texts from a vague liberal environmentalist perspective, not a more anti-

[18] Neala Schleuning, *Artpolitik: Social Anarchist Aesthetics in an Age of Fragmentation* (Autonomedia, 2013)
[19] Derek Wall, *Green History: A Reader in Environmental Literature, Philosophy and Politics* (Routledge, 1994)
[20] William Rueckert, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Iowa Review 9.1 (1978)

systemic ethical-political one. To give a hypothetical example, most ecocriticism would view a character's ecocidal actions in a story as resulting from personal alienation from nature, rather than placing the emphasis on the character's embeddedness in an ecocidal political-economic order and a set of societal values which end up discouraging identification with nature.

Given social ecology's holistic and intersectional view of the emergence and dissolution of social hierarchies – connecting the human social problems hierarchies cause to natural ecological problems – it could act as a corrective to this absence of systemic thinking, imbuing ecocriticism with a distinct set of values which link environmental concerns with broader social-political concerns. It can also serve as an integrative set of methods for examining the significance of texts, tying together more social forms of criticism – such as feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory – in the process of analysis. Social ecology could, in addition, serve as a bridge between several fields in the wider humanities.

Another thing it has the potential to bridge is the long-standing divide between the sciences and the humanities. Stephen Jay Gould, in his final book, lamented that scholars in what C.P. Snow called "the two cultures" had made such caricatures out of each other. He suggested that a reconciliation was needed so that the sciences could become more humane, and the humanities could become more rigorous.[21] Social ecology speaks to this concern with its emphasis on using the life sciences as a ground for a humanistic ethics, and in drawing out the potentialities for sentient flourishing latent in both natural and social phenomena.

And it's not as if this divide hasn't already been mended in practice, if not in theory, if one looks at arts which have tried to use the life sciences as an aesthetic guide, such as the neo-impressionists, or to scientists like Leonardo da Vinci or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who understood both realms of knowledge as different means through which to elucidate human understanding.

Two of the more salient examples of social ecological thinking in practical aesthetics are: first, the organic architecture movement of the early 20th century, in particular the designs and building philosophy of Frank Lloyd Wright; and second, art nouveau as a style and as design ethos.

Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture was guided by the notion that function (practical uses) should guide form (image and layout). In buildings such as Fallingwater in Pennsylvania, he tried to use the natural environment and its materials as conditioning for the forms the structures would take, so as to make synthetic buildings feel like natural extensions of the existing ecology.

Art nouveau came about in part as a reaction to much of the ugliness of the machine age, using environmental signifiers such as flowers, trees, water, and fauna to express a feeling of vitality and fecundity. It did not, however, shy away from using the most technically sophisticated tools and materials to accomplish this. This demonstrates a key insight of social ecology in fact: technology is not, as such, the antithesis of ecology, as long as it's used in the spirit of responsibility and stewardship, not domination and extractivism.

Developing a More Concrete Methodology

Going from applying social ecology to aesthetic objects which can more typically be considered art – such as literature and painting, or architecture and interior design – to a far

[21] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox: Mending the Gap Between Science and the Humanities* (Harvard University Press, 2003, 2011)

wider application to the whole aesthetic realm, we need to first establish exactly what the aesthetic is.

I've already brought up Jesse Cohn's social anarchist aesthetic, which uses the basic tenets of social ecology as one of its ideational pillars. Yet if one looks back far enough, and casts aside how his ideas have been treated by the "neo-pragmatist" school of interpretation, a strikingly similar methodology can be found in John Dewey and his seminal aesthetic work *Art as Experience*.[22]

The general thrust of Dewey's aesthetic theory is that we mustn't think of the arts as detached from the wider world of experience – by which he meant the full scope of everything humans think, feel, and do in their relations to the world around them, to each other, and to themselves. Taking this view of course implies a rejection of the classic hierarchy between "high" and "low" arts. Dewey stressed that comic strips, movies, and jazz music were no less arts, even if the highfalutin critics of his own day would prefer Stravinsky to popular folk music.

The arts themselves can be thought of as condensed and transfigured forms of human experience. Not only the experience of the artists, but also the accumulated experience – mental and physical – of the environment the art emerged from. Camille Pissarro's neo-impressionist paintings are just as much an expression of the towns, people, and landscapes he painted as his own internal reflections upon them. And the environments and peoples along the Mississippi River, however exaggerated, speak through the prose of Mark Twain as much as Twain himself speaks as an author. Also worth stressing is that experience itself is like Heraclitus's river, eternally flowing and in a continual state of becoming something else; as much Buddhist thought frames it, experience is "dependent-arising", being remade constantly by processes that are both natural and social, accidental and willed.

To simplify this theory, think of experience like "energy", made up of accumulated experience, which is channeled into art when someone uses it to make an object intended for human appreciation of that collective energy. Art is an "object" (whether physical or not) of refined experience for enhancing the participant's appreciation of the world they inhabit.

It should be stressed that appreciation here is used in the neutral, rather than positive, sense; as an artwork can just as well make us more conscious of the pains and injustices of the world, not only what's good and beautiful in it. For example, Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* makes the viewer appreciate the significance and horror of the holocaust, dwelling on the accumulated experience of death, fascism, and survival.

Going with Jesse Cohn's heuristic, informed by Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realist methodology, and keeping in mind John Dewey's conception of art as concentrated experience, what is there to be said about meaning in relation to this ecological view of aesthetics?

It should be obvious that the meaning of a given artwork can't be reduced to whatever the artist intended it to mean, as this excludes the whole ecosystem of experience from which the artwork emerges, and which it goes back into. Nor does meaning lie in the art object itself, as this could exclude the experience of the persons interpreting it. It's doesn't even exist exclusively in the minds of the interpreters, as this is excluding the fact that it is a purposefully concentrated object of experience, done in order to evoke particular kinds of responses.

[22] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Penguin, 1934)

Meaning, according to Cohn and Dewey, is rather what emerges in-between the observer and the object observed. It is neither totally embedded in the text itself (and authorial intent), nor totally embedded in the wishes of the audience. Meaning exists dialectically in the tension between interpreter and interpreted, arising out of the process of interpretation.

This relation between artwork and interpreter is similar to the Kant-like distinction made by Roy Bhaskar and Critical Realism between "intransitive" and "transitive" and layers of truth: the former is more-or-less unchanging and "solid", while the latter is changeable and "fluid". But just as transitive truths aim at an intransitive Truth, fluid interpretation aims at capturing solid meaning, at least at a particular point in time. So while a given artwork is always open to interpretation, as accumulated experience changes based on time and place, it is not so in an arbitrary way, given the intentions that guided its making. For example, *It's a Wonderful Life*, based on changes in political-economic realities, can interpreted either as supporting "capitalism" or "socialism", based on a number of factors relevant to the audience. But it cannot meaningfully be interpreted as being about blue space aliens from Proxima-B; unless one is writing additional fanfiction based on it, which would be a new artwork, itself subject to fluid interpretations aiming at its solid foundation as a text.

In brief, this mode of analysis can be seen as a middle-way between classical styles of criticism, which saw meaning as static and absolute, and postmodernist styles which see meaning as contingent and relativistic. Following the lead of Critical Realism and social ecology, we should adopt a naturalist conception of the world, rejecting both mystical idealism and mechanical materialism, and take the Heraclitian/Buddhist view of nature as in a constant state of flux, change, and transformation – then apply this ensemble of optics to aesthetic experience and reflection.

An Eco-Semiotic Conception of Aesthetics

Any hypothesis about the birth of art in primordial humanity is going to involve some degree of speculation, as we lack the adequate scientific tools to trace where and how the thing we now call art developed in human brains and life-processes. Though the one that I'm most drawn to is the theory offered by Lewis Mumford, the American social critic and historian of technology and urbanism, whose ideas formed the basis of a great deal of Murray Bookchin's work on social ecology.[23]

Mumford claimed that what made humans unique among animal species was not our tools, but our capacity to "signify", in the sense of semiotic signs. From the basic repetition of motions by our primate ancestors to signify food or danger, to the first sounds uttered to signify specific meanings, to the development of language, and to the invention of the first rituals – which evolved into everything from religions, to tools, to technics, a term he used to mean both techniques and technologies. The invention of the first spear from a sharpened stick required the ideation of thrust and penetration, applied to a physical object, however simple those ideational may have been.

In the earliest human societies, all the way to antiquity, there was little distinction made between arts and more general forms of social reproduction, as all could be classed as technics in some sense or another. As art critic Herbert Read noted, the ancient Greeks had no conception of artistic culture as a distinct domain from the rest of culture.[24] The arts were

[23] Thomas Parke Hughes and Agatha C. Hughes, *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual* (Oxford University Press, 1990)
[24] Herbert Read, *To Hell With Culture* (Routledge, 1963, 2002)

integrated into everyday life-processes rather than sectioned off into museums and galleries. Everything that served an aesthetic purpose also had some sort of instrumental purpose; statues of the gods were meant to be worshiped as icons of divinity, and decorated clay pots were used for storage.

Wherever one chooses to draw a line where art began to be thought of as something distinct from wider life-processes – the word "artist" itself first meant anyone who was skilled at a craft, from a painter to a blacksmith – it makes analytic sense to consider the aesthetic as something which emerges out of technics, just as technics emerged out of humanity's application of "semiosis" to the needs of survival, creating rituals, tools, and languages. This is what distinguishes Mumford's view of humans as signification-makers (*homo symbolicus*) from the similar, but competing, view of humans as tool-makers (*homo faber).*

It's here that I'd like to apply this hypothesis of *homo symbolicus* to the emerging fields of bio-semiotics and eco-semiotics, which are attempts to apply aesthetics categories to biotic ones, but also function the other way around.[25] Seeing life-processes, from chemistry to endosymbiosis, as sign-systems signifying intentional or interpretable meanings, as well as seeing human semiotics as relatable to biological functions, has enormous potential for reconceptualising aesthetic philosophy.[26]

While C.S. Peirce developed the first worked-out theory of semiotics, Saussurean semiology has dominated the field since the mid 20th century, especially in literary criticism, which involves applying his structuralist hypotheses of how language worked to the study of aesthetic "texts" – meaning anything that can be "read" (interpreted) in a textual manner, from books to cinema. Similar to Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ferdinand de Saussure posited that there was no necessary link between the signifiers of language – like the letters C-A-T – and the actual things they were intended to signify – such as a furry four-legged animal kept as a pet. Poststructuralist analyses diverge from their structuralist forebears, in particular with regard to the autonomy of signification from the material things signified, though they still rest on a common structuralist foundation and set of assumptions.

However, while both structuralist and poststructuralist discourses have evolved and absorbed new ideas from the wider humanities, they remain stuck with a crucial problem: they are informed by an outmoded conception of linguistics, which posits that there is no link – except convention – between signified and signifier.

Contemporary research reveals Noam Chomsky's hypothesis of a universal grammar to be more likely,[27] indicating that there are indeed links (though often very detached) between what Peirce called aesthetic "object" and "representamen", and what most contemporary semioticians called signified and signifier. To give a very general example, the word for "mother" in most languages tends to begin with, or prominently feature, an M sound, which could be derived from the onomatopoeia of humans suckling at a mother's breast as babies. There's also a basic commonality at the syntactic level for how sentences are structured and meaning is conveyed via speech, conversation, and writing. In short, while semiotic representations can diverge a great deal from the objects they represent, mimesis, as

[25] Marcello Barbieri, editor. *Biosemiotics: Information, Codes, and Signs in Living Systems* (New Life Sciences Inc., 2007)
[26] Alfred Kentigern Siewers, editor. *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics* (Buckwell University Press, 2013)
[27] "Chomsky Was Right, NYU Researchers Find: We Do Have a "Grammar" in Our Head", (NYU .edu, 2015), http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2015/december/chomsky-was-right-nyu-researchers-find-we-do-have-a-grammar-in-our-head.html

a process, is still ultimately derived from physical and biotic processes of material existence. At the very least, this research indicates that divorcing hermeneutics from the physical sciences of brain and body is mistaken in theory and, therefore, likely to have led to mistakes in practice.

According to Anjan Chatterje, author of *The Aesthetic Brain*, there are two components of the human brain that are close to each other, serving similar evolutionary functions, but still distinct enough to be considered different: the "liking" component and the "wanting" component. We tend to want the things we like, and like the things we want, but they don't always overlap. An example of wanting without liking is drug addiction, where the insatiable drive for a fix becomes disconnected from any feelings of enjoyment.[28] Aesthetic experiences, in turn, could be described as an inversion of that: liking without wanting, where appreciation of something is disconnected from the drive to consume it.

Rethinking aesthetic encounters and objects in these terms fits quite well with the both the art-as-experience view of John Dewey as well as social ecology's dialectical view of human-natural relations. Putting all of these together, we can conceive of the aesthetic itself as:

1. Concentrated and transfigured objects of experience,
2. Within broader mental and physical processes of social-ecological reproduction,
3. Rooted in the technics developed out of human capacities for signification,
4. Embedded as part of a grand process of biological evolution.

It isn't then much of a leap to start applying this more ecologically-rooted notion of the aesthetic to how we study everything from ancient cave paintings to the music of Bach. It both centres our conception of the aesthetic as something deeply human, while also decentring our conception of the ecological in human terms, acting as an in-built caution against anthropomorphic examinations of nature.

Our biotic existence, in our relation to the world around us, to a large degree sets the stage for how we make sense of it. The average human has two hands, two legs, two eyes, with a nose, mouth, and genitals in between those pairs. We have a tendency to break things down into dualities, and into dichotomies of "male" and "female" based on our brute physical existence, projecting the categories most relevant to us onto the rest of the biotic universe. Whereas from the perspective of fungi (if fungi had perspectives), trying to fit their tens of different reproductive combinations into a duality would seem absurd.

A charming example of an artwork that tries to raise consciousness of these facts is *Humon Comics*, showing through anthropomorphic characters how different animals have intimate and reproductive relationships, using human visual signifiers of man/woman to explain the dynamics of relations which don't operate anything like traditional human relations.[29]

Taking onboard these new insights doesn't necessitate throwing out all semiotic or aesthetic analyses rooted in structuralist or poststructuralist semiology. But future examinations would benefit from a general reorientation towards biology and ecology as a bedrock to stand on, adapting aesthetic theory to fit with new developments in the natural sciences, rather than segregating the arts to totally different and non-overlapping domain of study.

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[28] Anjan Chatterje, *The Aesthetic Brain: How we Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

[29] See Humon Comics, *Animal Lives*, http://humoncomics.com/archive/animal-lives

So adopting a more scientific and ecological view of the aesthetic should mean accepting that it isn't a pure ethereal realm of ideas, but something which is rooted in natural biotic processes.

However, we mustn't make the mistake of thinking this debunks Hume's Law and end up committing one appeal-to-nature fallacy after another. One of the most important facets of nature itself is self-transcendence, the "fuel" of evolution. We mustn't be tied down to the dictates of nature, trying to divine its willings like reading tea leaves, but rather strive to go beyond our current conditions. To defer to Murray Bookchin on the topic, we should try to view the "what-is" from the perspective of "what-could-be", based on a thing's potentialities for realising freedom and well-being.[30] Adopting an eco-semiotic view, with the values of social ecology in mind, this would entail examining art as an emergent set of ideational-material processes, rooted first in technics and the reproduction of human lifeworlds, and more broadly still within the signification systems of biotic life itself.

Art can be thought of like a "third nature" within what social ecology calls "second nature" (human society), which itself exists within "first nature" (the natural world); each one enclosed within the others as part of a self-creating ecosystem of semiosis.

Aesthetic Realms as Ecosystems

The social ecologist John P. Clark, taking the eco-cosmology of Bookchin's theories as a starting point, added in the notion of bioregions to social ecology.[31] Bioregions are parts of the Earth distinguished by natural boundaries such as seas, watersheds, and different flora and fauna. He used this framework and expanded it to conceptualise human society being made up of "psychoregions" of inter-subjective consciousness, inspired by the "psychogeography" practiced by the French art collective the Situationists.[32] Seeing these ideas within an eco-semiotic and experiential model of the aesthetic, the next logical step would be to adopt a new line of thinking about texts (in the sense the term is used in literary theory), reconceiving of them less like languages, and more like ecosystems.

It may seem as if this would take a lot of mental reconfiguring in order to adjust how we interpret art. But when one switches to this alternative optic, it's fascinating to look at how much the arts are already examined in this way, but without a consciously ecological orientation. We categorise genre and medium much like how field ecologists categorise flora and fauna. We study how texts relate to each other much like how biotic processes engage in symbiosis. And we even speculate on the similar questions of how, as persons, we should best relate to the transpersonal realms of nature and arts respectively.

The similarity becomes even more apparent if one considers the ideas of Yuriko Saito and her philosophic work on everyday aesthetics. Saito expands Dewey's art-as-experience model, applying it not only to intentional artworks, but to ordinary and conventional experiences of passing through the world, encompassing everything from walking down a street, to meditating in a garden, to eating dinner and taking in the layout of one's kitchen and living room. Anything that can be experienced and meditated upon through the senses can be considered part of the extended scope of the aesthetic.[33]

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[30] Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Black Rose Books, 1996)
[31] John P. Clark, *The Impossible Community: Realising Communitarian Anarchism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013)
[32] Max Cafard [John P. Clark], *THE SURRE(GION)ALIST MANIFESTO* (Anarchy Archives, 1990), http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/cafard.html
[33] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2008)

This isn't to imply that "everything is art", because after all if everything is art then nothing is. But it does mean that arts shouldn't be considered as an entirely different species of experiential object to everyday aesthetic experience of a more mundane kind.

To borrow an analogy from gestalt psychology – in particular the anarchist form co-developed by Paul Goodman – the world of everyday experience is like a shapeless and formless void before our minds focus on specific figures within it, like a picture which looks like either an old woman or a young woman depending on what parts you choose to focalise.[34] The picture remains the same, unless you physically alter it, but how you choose to focus on it conditions what kind of experience you're going to have from the act of looking. Meaning emerges from the dialectical tension between "organism" (looker) and "environment" (picture). What then of arts as distinct kinds of aesthetic experience? They are works of intentional transfigured experience which the mind focalises for the purpose of appreciation.

To switch now to the aesthetics-as-ecosystems idea, ordinary aesthetic experience is like walking amongst the wilderness (untamed nature), while artistic experience is like walking amongst a cultivated garden (domesticated nature). And just as gardens (arts) aren't totally self-enclosed systems, artworks aren't totally self-enclosed and apart from the larger lifeworld they exist in. The pollen from one garden can end up affecting flora out in the wilderness, just as arts can end up affecting the consciousness and practices of society. Different gardens are also connected, even if not in close proximity, by the styles of cultivation and the types of plants used, just as different artistic mediums borrow from and influence each other in a symbiotic relationship. And similar to both wild nature and cultured nature (everyday aesthetics and artistic aesthetics), we alter our surroundings via participation in them, in both positive and negative ways.

Applying this view to the world of artistic creation, it's worth discussing, briefly, what the implications are for thinking of art as the cultivation of a garden rather than the use of a language. It implies not only a desire to achieve aesthetic balance and coherence, but also a responsibility to be a steward to the forms of life one is working with. It also leads to one considering how others may make use of it and remake it to fit their own needs, acknowledging that life-processes cannot be locked into stasis, and that others will continue the act of cultivation with what you have started.

The invention and proliferation of new technologies which enable the widespread replication of artworks – or at least those which can be digitised – bodes well for such a change in approach, as it breaks down the concept of the artist as someone who creates an immortal object, which remains frozen and preserved throughout time. Instead, it leads to a view of the artist as a gardener: someone who creates an appreciable area out of the wilderness, while maintaining respect for the fact that the matter they are rearranging should not be treated in a base and instrumental manner, but cared for as fellow life-forms – or, in a complementary fashion, the artist as a gardener who takes over cultivation of someone else's garden, growing it in a different way, adding new elements and taking away others, or even turning it into a different kind of garden entirely.

A great illustration of this process in action is internet "remix culture": fans of a piece of music, filmmaking, drawing, or anything else, who modify it or add to it, coming up with their own meanings for it. For example, hip-hop and electronic music uses the technique of

[34] Frederick S. Perls, Ralph Franklin Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy* (Souvenir Press Ltd, 1951, 1994)

sampling to use elements of other songs as part of the creation of new material.[35] Fanfiction is a medium that exploded with the advent of the web. It entails lovers of particular artworks using characters or worlds from those artworks to tell their own stories, often mixing the characters from several different novels or making alternate universes where, for instance, people from a television series set in the 1700s are reimagined in a science-fiction future, exploring how the setting would alter their behaviour. Fanart, likewise, contains a plethora of astonishing tributes to media the artists love, ranging from portraits, to comics (effectively visual fanfiction), to making outfits and objects from stories they like in the practice of cosplay (short for "costume play").

As journalist and novelist Laurie Penny explains, this also provides tools for those from more marginalised social groups to reimagine their favourite media to be more inclusive of their experiences, having grown up where "white cishet middle-class male" was the default human being, despite being a minority of the human population.[36] This is nothing new in essence, as everyone from Shakespeare to Brecht to Augusta Gregory retold familiar stories in ways which made them relevant to audiences with similar experiences to them. This comes from the acknowledgement that art, like the natural world, should be a commons: a common treasury which is stewarded and used to serve common needs, rather than sectioned off or used to serve the needs of a privileged few. While partisans of remix culture often run into problems of intellectual property laws putting a stop to their creations – much as the medieval commons was enclosed by the powers of state and capital in the past – this new enclosure of the digital commons is being actively and cooperatively resisted by those it most benefits, demanding that art be a participatory and autonomous realm for the enjoyment of all, not a realm of closed-off and fenced-in fields. This chimes well with the politics of social ecology: a rejection of both hierarchical control and propertarian individualism, embracing mutuality, free cooperation, and unity-in-diversity as alternatives.

If technology and the activity of art lovers (both artists and fans) continue to break down many of the established conventions of art in the modern era, we may gradually see a shift in the ecosystems of the aesthetic from a concern with "preservation" to a will towards "regeneration", encompassing the requirements of both responsibility and creativity.

The Ethics and Ethos of Criticism

Having suggested the ingredients for a social ecological approach to aesthetics in terms of its analytics, I'd like to also take the chance of sketching out some normative components of such an approach. Namely, its ethics and ethos. By ethics, I mean its general principles of engagement in terms of making aesthetic objects, as well as critiquing them. By ethos, I mean its overarching spirit of thought and practice – an "attitude", if you will, of relating to the ecosystems of aesthetic experience.

Keeping in mind social ecology's concern with mending the nature/culture divide, and social anarchism's aesthetics involving the dissolution of hierarchies combined with the promotion of free cooperation as an alternative, such an ethos should reflect those projects.

If I could summarise the aims of a social anarchist and social ecological ethos, it would be in the simple directive "empower the disempowered and include the excluded", with the ideal aspired being a situation of egalitarian empowerment and maximal inclusiveness: the free flourishing of free individuals through free cooperation. The

[35] Adam Haupt, *Stealing Empire: P2P, Intellectual Property and Hip-hop Subversion* (Human Sciences Research Council, 2008)
[36] Laurie Penny: *Change the Story, Change the World* – re:publica 2016, https://youtu.be/6lki78B31Lc

disempowered and excluded in early 21st century society, at least with respect to the global north, ranges from women, to people of colour, to LGBT+ people, the disabled, nonhuman animals, and even the natural world. Though disempowerment and exclusion – both forms of domination – are context-sensitive, and no particular group should ever be pointed to as universally so across time and place.

The reason for not focusing on a specific agent in need of liberation is not only out of the need for liberation to have as broad a scope as possible, but because domination is relative and can change over time. A party empowered in one place or time may become a victim of oppression or marginalisation in another. This highlights social anarchism's ethic of opposing all forms of domination, refusing to tie the concept down to a set list of institutions, such as the state, capitalism, or patriarchy.[37]

For the maker of art, this ethos should imply calling attention to domination, wherever it might exist, then attempting to expose it as both limiting and irrational relative to conditions which are freer and more egalitarian. This more rational, free, and inclusive social order need not be portrayed directly in the art, showing overt contrast, but it can be hinted at or its potential shown as latent within the existing conditions. Purely utopian depictions of liberated societies may sometimes be too "complete", giving the audience a perfect ideal which is impossible to work towards in practice. But pure negativity, portraying the current or past world as an inescapable hellhole with no hope of anything better, can be just as paralysing.

For the aesthetician or critic of art, this ethos should imply assessing a work with what Voltairine de Cleyre called a "double reading".[38] This doesn't (necessarily) mean examining the same work twice, but it does mean examining it on two different "levels". The first for pleasure, critiquing a book of movie for example on its own terms, taking account of what it's trying to do and how well it succeeds in doing it. The second for its social significance, judging to what degree it negates existing structures of hierarchy and domination, and contains drives towards a better world of free flourishing and free cooperation.

Double reading, as a method, is connected to the acknowledgement that the arts emerge from a complex web of (aesthetic and non-aesthetic) experience, with many different social, political, and economic factors at play. It is possible to assess a certain work as successful in its own terms, but also reactionary or limited in social terms. It is also possible, as both critics and artists, to decode or remix an art object to have more liberatory social significance than it had originally; much like the Situationists, with their practice of détournement ("detouring" or "repurposing"), redesigned advertisements to be anti-capitalist instead of consumerist. Or how fanfiction writers take the characters from apolitical or sexually chaste literature and create their own stories featuring politically radical or romantically queer subject matter. All of which entail using new technologies of creation and dissemination to fulfil desires which were stoked by, but not realised in, the artworks they enjoy.

With this ethos in mind, guiding the aesthetic process, I would argue the ethics of art-making and art-critiquing become quite straightforward. In aesthetic creation, critique, and re-creation, support:

a) The dissolution of hierarchies and centralisation, both practical and conceptual

b) The educing of potentialities for liberatory states of being

[37] Robert Graham, *We Do Not Fear Anarchy – We Invoke It: The First International and the Origins of the Anarchist Movement* (AK Press, 2016)
[38] A.J. Brigati, editor. *The Voltairine de Cleyre Reader* (AK Press, 2004)

c) The negation of conventional wisdom where it leads to social inequality, exclusion, atomisation, or anti-individuality

d) The promotion of past or novel wisdom where it leads to equality, inclusiveness, mutuality, and free initiative of the individual.

Both ethos and ethics together should strive to bring about a participatory aesthetics which is anti-hierarchical, like postmodernist aesthetics, but without the relativism of that tradition, being rooted in a definite set of social-political values. It can serve as a dialectical synthesis of the best of free agency and foundational structure as artistic bases.

Conclusion

As made clear at the beginning, this is not a blueprint for new social ecological aesthetics so much as a collection of building materials for one (or perhaps more than one). The job of giving this new movement ideational and material form will of course fall to the new generations of creatives who make use of it: authors, filmmakers, musicians, architects, painters, and artists in fields which may not have been invented yet, making use of new technics and cross-breeding disciplines in order to grow it organically.

It will need to be suffused (in ideas) with a principled set of value-optics – emphasising an anti-hierarchical, inclusive, and ecological ethos – while also flexible enough (in practice) to enable a diverse assortment of experiments to be tried with vision, form, and content. If the ethical-political thrust of social ecology means a regenerative method of educing the liberatory potentials in popular movements, then a new aesthetics of social ecology must take a complementary approach in drawing out the liberatory elements in popular arts, and in aesthetic reality in general – with the aim being the encouragement of a social order based on the free flourishing of free individuals in a liberated and ecological world, examining every artwork for the seeds which could be cultivated to grow a eutopia.

Positive examples of such social-ecological art from the past include: the transcendentalist poetry of Whitman, Emerson, and Thoreau; the utopian city planning of Ebenezer Howard; the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright; the speculative fiction of Ursula K. Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson; many of the manga graphic novels of Osamu Tezuka; and the animated cinema of Hayao Miyazaki.

Encouraging examples from the present can be found in the nascent solarpunk subculture[39], the P2P participatory culture movements, DIY forms of art on platforms such as DeviantArt and YouTube, and countless other attempts at mixing old and new wines in fresh new bottles, taking advantage of the possibilities decentralist technologies offer.

As new waves of creativity make themselves known in small and popular arts scenes, critics and theorists should follow the geist of getting away from detached and elitist modes of analysis and adopt a more participatory approach to examining the aesthetic dimension. They should take on Yuriko Saito's recommendation and broaden the scope of aesthetics to include everyday reality, psychologising the effects it can have on artistic experience, as well as get more involved in new media, spreading their analyses to a mass audience via web videos, podcasts, and other avenues.

Most of all, both artists and critics should respond to an era of crisis with vision that (dialectically) negates it: radical hopefulness for a world beyond scarcity and hierarchy. In a time of accelerating climate catastrophe, war, fascist ascendency, expanding bureaucracy, and

[39] Ben Valentine, *Solarpunk Wants to Save the World* (Hopes and Fears, 2014), http://www.hopesandfears.com/hopes/city/life/215749-solarpunk

the further centralisation of power, the most rebellious thing that can be done is, perhaps, to dare to be positive: to try believing that a better world is always possible, even as the seas rise up around us and demagogic leaders try to set us against each other. We can still keep striving to empower the disempowered and include the excluded, with minds fixed on a non-hierarchical world of abundance to come – because, as Colin Ward once said, the potentials for such a world are always there, "like seeds beneath the snow".[40] It should be the task of a social ecological aesthetics to help them.

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